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ABSTRACT

In this survey, approximately 30 teachers chose from a list of 56 behavior descriptors those they thought characterized either the learning disabled or slow-learner/low-achiever populations. Results indicated that, as a group, teachers did not distinguish between learning disabled and other under-achievers on the listed behavioral descriptors, except on the characteristics of low intelligence. Eighty-three percent of the teachers characterized low achievers as having low intelligence, while 24% thought learning disabled students could be described in this fashion. Findings called into question educators' ability and purpose in making classificatory descisions and illustrates the confusion surrounding the learning disability designation. (The list of behavior descriptors is included.) (Author/CL)

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RECOGNIZING THE LEARNING DISABLED CHILD: WHICH BEHAVIORS DO TEACHERS USE?

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ABSTRACT

Teachers routinely refer students for suspected exceptional educational need in the area of learning disabilities. The basis for the decision to refer is left up to the discretion of the educator. Professionals appear to formulate their own criteria for the disability. In this survey, approximately thirty teachers chose from a list of descriptors those they thought characterized either the learning disabled or slow-learner/low-achiever populations. Results indicated that, as a group, teachers did not distinguish between learning disabled and other under-achievers on the listed behavioral descriptors except on the characteristic of low intelligence. Little evidence is provided to suggest that these educators used specific criteria when making referral decisions.

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RECOGNIZING THE LEARNING DISABLED CHILD:
WHICH BEHAVIORS DO TEACHERS USE?

Recently, researchers have discussed the continuing difficulty with the definition and operationalization of a learning disability. For instance, Epps, Ysseldyke, and Algozzine (1983) reported 14 operational definitions of learning disabilities grounded in either test scatter, ability-achievement discrepancies, or low subject-related achievement. Algozzine, Ysseldyke, and Shinn (1982) warned that different types of classificatory criteria may lead to the identification of educationally different populations. Indeed, investigations focused on the decision-making process highlight the confusion inherent in educational classification. Professionals may display different values or perspectives in placement decisions (Pfeiffer & Naglieri, 1984); psychometric measures may not aid in the discrimination of disabled learners from others (Epps, Ysseldyke, & McGue, 1984; Kavale & Andreassen, 1984). In fact, when children classified as L.D. were compared to unclassified but like-performing age-mates, no psychometric differences between the groups were observed (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, & McGue, 1982). Consequently, large percentages of children (each with his/her own idiosyncratic characteristics) may be misclassified suggesting that formal eligibility are not consulted (Shepard, Smith, & Vojir, 1983; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, & Graden, 1982).

Given the equivocable nature of the definition of L.D., several researchers favor a broader, more "educational" definition of disability. Keogh (1983) suggests that learning disability be used as a generic term for all mild educational handicaps while McLeod (1983) prefers "age-and-ability referenced underachievers"(p. 24). To be effective, however, any definition and/or operationalization of a learning disability needs to be understood and implemented by the primary referral agent: the teacher. Research cited thus far has emphasized L.D. designations post hoc, i.e., after a referral was initiated. A referral of any kind may suggest an expectation of educational difficulty. What needs to be assessed is the referral agent's a priori evaluation of academic competence and which, if any, behaviors lead to the suspicion of exceptional educational need in the area of learning disability.

In the present investigation, the extent to which teachers distinguish between specific learning disabled and slow-learner (under-achiever) characteristics was explored. As noted previously, these two groups appear to display the most overlap of educationally-related characteristics (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, & McGue, 1982). At issue was whether the learning disabled were perceived by instructors as possessing recognizable, classroom-related, behavioral characteristics.

Method

Subjects. Elementary school teachers from three small mid-western school districts were asked for their anonymous participation in the two-part survey. Approximately 30 individuals responded with usable completed questionnaires for each category (learning disabled, n=33; slow-learner, n=30) of the survey. A number of surveys were returned with comments to the effect that the psychologists were unjustly using the questionnaires as part of district teacher evaluations. These surveys were not included in the analysis.

Instrument. The questionnaire (attached) was composed of behavioral descriptors primarily concerned with classroom-related characteristics. Fifty-six behaviors were listed in random order and were chosen to include those characteristics frequently listed in the literature and/or referral forms as indicative of learning problems. Other neutral and positive behaviors were added to provide balance to the survey.

Procedure. Questionnaire data was requested on behalf of the district school psychologist. A short written explanation (attached) of the purpose of the questionnaire accompanied each administration. Explanations varied only in their use of the term learning disabled or slow-learner with respect to the questionnaire. In addition, a short verbal explanation was initially given. Simply stated, teachers were told that the school psychologist was interested in seeing which

behaviors teachers believed defined or distinguished a given group of students from others. Teachers were required to give yes or no responses to the descriptors listed.

Distribution of questionnaires was counterbalanced, (i.e., half of teachers were asked to describe slow-learners in the first questionnaire and learning disabled in the second,and vice versa). The first of the questionnaires was returned before the second was distributed. This was done to avoid possible response comparisons between the surveys.

Results

The surveys were analyzed using contingency table analysis. A student classification X behavior variable contingency table was tabulated for each behavioral characteristic listed on the questionnaire. The lambda statistic was chosen as the measure of association due to the nominal level of the variables involved.

Of the 56 behavioral characteristics listed, only low intellectual ability showed a moderate degree of association with student classification ($lambda_{(symmetric)} = .567$),($X^2 = 19.69$, $p < .0001$). Eighty-three percent of the teachers characterized low achievers as having low intelligence while 24% thought learning disabled students could be described in this fashion (see Table I). Interestingly, although low intelligence appeared to be associated to a specific

group by teachers, average intellectual ability was not so clearly used as a descriptor ($lambda_{(symmetric)} = .152$). That is, 39% of teachers described learning disabled students as showing average ability while 10% defined slow-learners as having this characteristic. Likewise, none of the other behaviors/descriptors on the questionnaire were specifically associated with either student group by the teachers ($p > .001$).

Discussion

Although the survey used was a relatively crude indicator of teachers' perceptions of students, the findings pose some interesting questions about an educator's ability to distinguish between learning disabled and slow-learning groups. Recognizing that both categories can be characterized as under-achievers, it was surprising that the only behavioral variable associated with either group was low intellectual ability. It appeared, then, that teachers were not noting specific behavioral or learning differences in these two categories of learners. Since teachers are primarily responsible for initial referrals for educational need, this may suggest that the decision to refer is more a function of some generalized concern over an individual's achievement than an actual attempt at addressing unique and educationally relevant differences in student behavior. Such a finding would call into question educators' ability and

purpose in making classificatory decisions and further demonstrate the confusion surrounding the learning disability designation. As Keogh and McLeod have recommended, it would appear that the concept of disability refers to some nonspecific educational under-achievement--at least for this sample of instructors.

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Table I

Crosstabulation of Group
by Low Intellectual Ability

	Low Ability		
Group	NO	YES	
Slow-learner	n= 5 16.7%	n= 25 83.3%	n= 30
L.D.	n= 25 75.8%	n= 8 24.2%	n= 33

Chi Square = 19.69 with 1 degree of freedom. $p<.0001$
Lambda = .567

Teachers are in a unique position to observe children's behaviors on a day to day basis. As such, they can develop accurate pictures of specefic "educational types" (over-achievers, the highly motivated, average students, etc.). For this reason we would like your opinion on characteristics you see as defining the _____ _____*. How would the _____* differ from his classmates? This information may be useful in curricular planning. Please check all the behaviors listed on the attached sheet which seem to you as descriptive of a child who is _____*

*learning disabled or slow-learner inserted.

____ clumsy, awkward (gross motor)

____ hearing problems/history of ear infections

____ poor handwriting

____ discipline problem (in class)

____ hyperactive

____ poor reading ability (decoding)

____ low intellectual ability

____ average math skills (calculation)

____ good attention span

____ average oral or expressive language ability

____ poor speller

____ poor vocabulary skills

____ poor math skills

____ friendly, likeable

____ good vocabulary skills

____ easily distracted

____ inability to begin tasks immediately

____ poor ability to organize work

____ the child is enthusiastic and believes he/she is doing fine in shcool

____ confuses directions

____ doesn't always understand what is heard, misunderstands verbal instructions

____ Poor understanding of concepts - number, time, space

____ review, practice, and drill helps the child's learning

____ impulsive

____ low self-confidence

____ plays with younger children

____ daydreams

____ completes assignment

____ history of medical problems

____ polite

____ low socio-economic status

____ selfish

____ poor memory

____ vision problems

____ short attention span

____ poorly motivated to learn

____ withdrawn

____ good handwriting

____ well disciplined in class

____ poor reading ability (comprehension)

____ good speller

____ good peer related social skills

____ average intellectual ability

____ follows directions in class

____ apparently well adjusted

____ low frustration level

____ erratic and inconsistent classroom performance

____ frequent preseveration

____ inability to sustain one's effort (concentration) for average periods of time

____ loses place in reading

____ reverses certain letters or words when reading

____ inability to categorize or see relations between things

____ history of learning difficulties in family

____ in group activities the child will mimic other student's answers or give unrelated or vague responses

____ tries hard

____ participates in class discussions